Overlooked model uncertainties may misinform forest management strategies

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Abstract: Forests play a major role in mitigating climate change, but increasing threats to forests from climate change have heightened the importance of managing these systems. Robust forecasts of forest composition with increasing climate change are critical to this aim, but are currently highly variable. To help guide management in the face of this variability and understand where we can most rapidly reduce uncertainty through improved models, we compare over XX ecological models and climate scenarios in forecasts for forests across Europe. Our approach considers a gradient of more mechanistic ('process-based') to correlative models of species distributions to find that uncertainty in ecological models can drive more variation than vastly different climate scenarios (e.g., SSP2 vs. SSP5), but also areas with relatively consistent projections [give overview of these and say that this could reduce uncertainty in how to manage for these areas]. [Maybe something on using existing range data leads to more pessimistic forecasts?] Our results highlight a new way to approach ecological forecasting that better identifies areas of higher certainty and, conversely, the areas where managers will need more diversified approaches and where more ecological study may be most useful.

Main

Forests are key to pursuing climate change mitigation policies and achieving carbon neutrality[1,2]. Yet, forests are increasingly under pressure. In Europe, temperatures are rising twice as fast as the global average[3], and unprecedented pulses of tree mortality have been reported in the last decade[4]. As a result, some European forests are becoming net CO_2 sources[5,6], due to decreased growth[5,7], larger burned areas[8,9], and increased pest- and drought-induced dieback[6,10,11]. Forest managers are facing unprecedented challenges, as they must address current threats while also promoting long-term adaptation to climate change. In this context of high uncertainty, better guidance is needed to implement successful strategies.

Given the diversity of predictive ecological models, the challenge of providing practical insights for forest management is even greater. Different models, ranging from correlative to more mechanistic approaches, may provide highly divergent projections[12–15]. While it remains unclear under which conditions one approach is more reliable than another[16], most forecasting studies still rely on a limited set of models[17–20]. We thus often lack a comprehensive understanding of what drives differences between projections[21]. Given the urgency of climate change, we must incorporate this diversity and merge across ecological and climatological models to provide a complete picture of both the threats and opportunities for forests.

Gaining a better understanding of where uncertainties originate and how they relate is crucial to identify opportunities to address policy-relevant questions[23]. Species shifts are predicted to have major impacts on timber production and on the forest economic sector[18,19]. Forest managers need to know whether the current species will be able to tolerate future climate conditions, whether they can rely on its natural regeneration, or whether they should capitalize on new species opportunities. If the main driver of variation across projections is the different ecological models, even more than different global emissions scenarios, it becomes critical to encompass the full range of models. Failing to do so could lead to overly confident predictions about which species will or will not be able to survive in future climates, ultimately leading to counterproductive or even detrimental forest management decisions.

To understand the level of confidence we can place in predictions requires methods that account for all the various components of climatological and biological uncertainties, including socio-economic scenarios, global climate models, ecological models, down to the species level. To this aim, we combined over 2,000 projections of forest tree species distributions, considering in particular a range of models, from more mechanistic ('process-based') to correlative models. Fully accounting for our current level of knowledge about future climate states and species functioning allows us to quantify the contribution of each component to the total variation across projections. This approach represents a significant advancement over previous studies, which overlooked large portions of uncertainty, and will lead to better informed decision-making to improve the resilience of our forests.

Results and discussion

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